

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:  
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

**“Conflict of Interest? Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Turkey”**

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NISHANOV: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you so much for joining us this morning.

My name is Bakhti Nishanov. I'm a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Helsinki Commission. And today we're going to have a discussion – what we think is a very important and timely conversation about Turkey.

Before I launch into why we set this up, I first of all would like to acknowledge our co-chairman, Helsinki Commission Co-Chairman Mr. Cohen. And he has joined us this morning, and we really appreciate that. And maybe before we start – I know you have an incredibly busy schedule – I would like to offer you an opportunity to offer your remarks, sir.

COHEN: Well, thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to participate.

I have been the co-chair of the Turkey Caucus since I came to Congress in 2007. I think the origins of that – I'm not positive how that occurred exactly, but my grandfather, who I didn't know and to be honest my mother I don't think knew, was from Turkey, as indicated from records I've seen on Ancestry.com. But Abraham Hassan (sp) was from Turkey, and so I'm a young Turk. (Laughter.) And I visited Turkey once. I'd like to go back again. It was – I enjoyed my trip to Istanbul, of course, and to Ankara, where I really fell in love with the monument to Ataturk, and I'm a big fan of Ataturk's. He was an amazing man.

There have been concerns I've had about Turkey's descent, I guess, concerning human rights over the years, and most recent I guess – it's been gradual, but the last four or five years have been even greater – judges who have been arrested, public officials who have been arrested, press who have been arrested. And Turkey does not have a good record on human rights, and I regret that. Mr. Erdogan has certain characteristics that are concerning about power and about reestablishing Turkey as some type of a(n) Ottoman Empire to some extent.

But anyway, I'm looking forward to your testimony. And we need to do what we can to see that the whole world is fair for citizens to express themselves and to – press to express themselves and for people to get information, without which we will not have good democracies. So, with that, I yield back my balance of my time.

NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Co-Chairman Cohen. Really appreciate your personal story, and I think this gives extra meaning to your participation in this briefing today.

Just to set the stage a little bit for this conversation, I said timely. And the reason for that, I think – obviously, I set it up, so I would say that it's timely. But I think if you follow Turkey or Eurasia or the Middle East, you will have noted that Turkey has been in the news in the headlines a lot lately. I mean, even if you don't follow it but you watched the Super Bowl this past weekend, you will have noticed that, you know, Turkish Airlines was very prominently featured in a pregame show. They were a part – they were sponsors, actually, of the pregame show, and they were very – it was – you know, Turkey is a part of a conversation that is happening worldwide and here in the United – (audio break) – too much because we want to hear

it from panelists. But I think I would like just to sort of set it up just a little bit and understand why we're having this.

Things that are happening in Turkey I think I would like to describe as the good, the bad, and the ugly, right? The good is, on the foreign policy front, we are very much encouraged by Turkey's efforts to normalize its relationship with Armenia. That's been in the news. That's great. We've seen Turkey-Israel relationship improve. And in fact, the president of Israel is going to be visiting Turkey on March 9<sup>th</sup>. With Egypt, with UAE, with all the neighbors we've seen this effort to normalize ties and to be a – (audio break) – and responsible partner to the neighbors, but also within the context of NATO and OSCE.

We also appreciate Turkey's hosting the world's largest population of refugees. I mean, this should not go unacknowledged. Turkey is – has this heavy burden, and I think it is important that we acknowledge that and we do as a global community whatever we can do to support Turkey in this effort.

The bad side is, just like even by COVID standards – by COVID – (inaudible) – standards, I think Turkey has had a very difficult 2021. The economy plunged. We saw the currency plunge. And officially, I believe, the inflation rate was almost close to 50 percent, and just incredible pain – economic pain that COVID caused. But frankly, some of the governance issues that Turkey has experienced, right – independence of the central bank came under question – some of these issues are self-made. Those are that side of things.

I think (the other ?) side of things, I think as Mr. Cohen talked about, is the human rights record. Turkey is an important NATO ally and a founding member of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe. As such, it has taken upon itself major commitments on upholding human rights for its own citizens. This is not about United States. This is not about OSCE. This is about Turkey and its own citizens. And unfortunately, what we've seen, we see continued arrest of journalists, including on Article 299, the controversial insulting the president. We see people still languishing in prisons on dubious charges. And we see, frankly, a strong anti-immigrant sentiment – which, again, it's a complex issue, but that resulted in some of the attacks against Syrian-owned businesses and Syrian – (audio break).

So all of this is with a background of Turkey saying that it wants – reiterating time and again. Last month, President Erdogan talked – met with ambassadors of EU, said EU's – Turkey's path is toward the EU. The commitment to join EU yet not upholding these values is – seems like a contradiction. That's why we call this a conflict of – conflict of interest, a question mark. I mean, there are all these issues happening, but what is going on and how can we understand Turkey's motivation? And if we can understand them better, can we help Turkey – just like any other country, it has its own issues – to live up to standards that it has taken upon itself?

So that's the – that's the briefing. That's what we want to do. And I think it's very important that – the prism through which we are looking at this. Turkey is an important NATO ally, but it's important for friends to have conversations – honest and frank conversations – and

this is what it's all about. It's toward an eye to improvement, to getting a better relationship that we are holding this briefing.

So, without further ado, I would like to introduce our – today's excellent panelists. I'm sure if you – again, you've been following this world, you know both of them.

First, we have Soner Cagaptay. He's the director of Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute. You have seen his multiple books he's an author of, fantastic. I highly recommend his books. He has written extensively on the U.S.-Turkish relationship, Turkish domestic politics, and Turkish nationalism. He's a columnist for Turkey's oldest and most influential English-language paper and he's a contributor to CNN. His books have been translated. They are in English, but into Turkish, Italian, Greek, and Croatian. So thank you, Soner, for joining us this morning.

We also have Deniz Yuksel. Deniz is a Turkey advocacy specialist at Amnesty International. She previously had conducted research on Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East and the U.S.-Turkey relationship, Turkish domestic politics, refugees, human rights, and religious freedom. And she – prior to that, she designed and actually taught a human rights education course in partnership with the Mother Child Education Foundation in Istanbul, Turkey.

So these are our panelists. What our – our whole thing is to have them, our witnesses, present their testimonies this morning, and then I'm really hoping for a lively Q&A conversation. Just a note on that: Please submit your questions to everyone in the chat box so that way I can see them and I will address them to our witnesses.

So thank you so much. Soner, we're going to start with you. If you could just lay out the framework for Turkish foreign policy, and then we can – we're going to go to Deniz, talk about domestic human rights, and see if we can connect them up, and how we can use one to nudge the other. Soner?

CAGAPTAY: Thank you so much, Bakhti. I wanted to start by, of course, thanking you for setting this up. When you first contacted me to set up this conversation a while ago, there was no looming war in Ukraine. So, indeed, Turkey's importance to the U.S. continues because Turkey sits in a neighborhood surrounded by Iran, Iraq, Syria, formerly ISIS-held territories, and, across the Black Sea, Russia. So whatever U.S. policies are regarding those four countries and ISIS the entity, they're much easier with Turkey onboard and less cumbersome and more effective. So I think it's really important, as you said, to see bigger engagement with Turkey in these areas, but also important to see that Turkey's democracy in the meantime, you know, perhaps recovers. So thanks again for setting up this conversation.

I also wanted to thank Co-Chair Mr. Cohen for joining us this morning. I know he's very busy.

And I'm especially flattered to be on the same panel with Deniz Yuksel, whose work I'm a great fan of. So what I would ask to do this morning is to have a discussion a little bit on

Turkish domestic politics, but more on the foreign policy side, and then – and then turn the mic over to Deniz.

I think on the domestic side, of course, the biggest story is that Turkish President Erdogan, after he had an impressive run as prime minister and president for almost 20 years, has sort of run to the end of his popularity. This has a lot to do with Erdogan's quite bright economic record until recently. He won, through his party – Justice and Development Party, AKP – over a dozen nationwide elections on a platform of strong economic growth. Erdogan lifted many people out of poverty. He has increased access to services, improved access to the pie. So there's a bright side to his legacy and that has helped him win over a dozen nationwide polls.

But Turkey's economy under Erdogan went into recession for the first time in 2018, and that's the main reason why he lost the elections for Istanbul, Ankara, and other big cities. The economy has exited recession, but the macro indicators don't look very good. Inflation is skyrocketing, the highest it has been since Erdogan came to power; unemployment is rising; and there's a general sense of establishment fatigue, I guess, linked to the Erdogan administration that, yes, he may have been the problem solver and the face of change in Turkey once, but not anymore. That has to do with the opposition being resilient, especially since the – winning Istanbul and Ankara and other big cities in local elections.

I think that one of important takeaways of Turkey under Erdogan – and Bakhti mentioned I've written Erdogan's biography, "New Sultan," which I've highlighted in that book also; shameless plug, of course, I have a book in the background – I think that one of the lessons of Turkey in the last 20 years under Erdogan is that the lesson that this country provides is the opposite of Iraq and Afghanistan. If the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan were that it takes a really long time to build a democracy, the lesson of Turkey under Erdogan is that it also takes a really long time to kill one. Turkish democracy is resilient. It's not dead. Elections matter. And elections are next year, 2023, and unless Mr. Erdogan delivers phenomenal economic growth and restores his base again it's very unlikely that he's going to win those elections.

And I think that, of course, that doesn't mean Mr. Erdogan is going to create a fair playing field. He controls over 90 percent of the media. That's his illiberal side. His bright side is economic growth. Of course, he's also a nativist populist leader. He has cracked down on demographics unlikely to vote for him, brutalized them. Over the years, he has eliminated checks and balances. He now appoints the majority of judges to the high courts without a confirmation process. As I said earlier, 90 percent of the media is controlled by businesses tied to him or linked to him. And the race for the next election, unfortunately, won't be fair, but it will be free.

And that's where Turkey's different than the country that most people like to compare it to, Russia. I think that's a false analogy when it comes to the country's democratic record. What happened in Turkey in 2019, Erdogan losing elections in big cities to liberal opposition mayors, could never happen under Putin's Russia. But such a thing has happened in other countries nearby such as in Hungary and Poland, where similarly autocratic leaders – Orban and

Kaczynski and Duda and their allies – have lost Budapest and Warsaw to liberal opposition mayors, respectively.

So one of the reasons I love studying Turkey and writing about it is that I believe if countries were vegetables, Turkey would be the analytical onion, meaning it does not have an analytical core. You analyze it, you think you got to it, and it evades you.

So here's a case study. Turkey under Erdogan, unfortunately, is not a full democracy, but it's also not a dictatorship. I think that's simplistic to call it as such. I think Turkey is a democracy that has fallen under an autocrat. And just as in Hungary and Poland, there is great potential for this democratic resilience to kick back. Of course, the big issue there is that the opposition is now not only resilient since their victories in big cities, but also unified.

I'd say President Erdogan's biggest mistake in domestic politics to date was his switch to an executive-style presidential system in 2018. Now, the system was supposed to make him more powerful. Hypothetically, it did. It increased his powers. He's now head of state; head of government; head of the police, which is a national force; head of ruling party. Never before in Turkey's history of having had – being a multiparty democracy – and the country held its first elections in 1950 – has an elected leader accumulated so much power. But ironically, the switch to this new system, presidential system, has also unified Erdogan's opposition, because prior to that there was a parliamentary democratic system, multiparty race. Six or even more parties competed and Erdogan's party, AKP, could always win elections, sometimes with as little as a third of the popular vote. That's not the case anymore. Now he has to win half of the popular vote. And not only is that impossible for him mathematically, but also the opposition, which was constituted by disparate groups of Kurdish and Turkish nationalists and liberals and conservatives who hated each other, realized that the switch to a presidential system requires a two-way race and if they don't unify they'll disappear. So the opposition is coalescing, and I think that's Mr. Erdogan's biggest challenge.

But of course, Erdogan is a very smart political player and I think we should not underestimate his next moves. I think while trying to restore economic growth he'll, unfortunately, probably also implement more autocratic measures. Deniz is more of an expert on these and I'm sure she'll do a better job of explaining them than I can. But I wanted to look at Mr. Erdogan's foreign policy a little bit before I finish, and this is, I think, also important because we're seeing a sort of a pivot in Turkish foreign policy.

You know, Ankara is trying to restore ties with its Gulf – rich Gulf neighbors, Emiratis and Saudis, as well as with Israel, with which ties ruptured in 2010 during the flotilla incident and never recovered, really, fully since. I think that is driven by a sense of isolation, that some of these foreign policy adventures in the Middle East have left Turkey more isolated than before. I agree with that. I think Turkey's more isolated in the Middle East today than it has ever been since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. And that's ironic because about 10 years ago, when Mr. Erdogan launched the foreign policy, the idea was that Turkey should just not be second fiddle to the West; it should go to the Middle East, where it can become a star-power nation by and through leadership of Muslim-majority countries. This was supposed to make Turkey the leading country in the Middle East. Now, of course, Turkey is really an isolated country except

for Qatar and the internationally recognized government of Libya. It has no friends and allies, so it's trying to reset with the Israelis, Egyptians, Emiratis, and Saudis. And I think those are going to move forward.

But there's an important – another part of Mr. Erdogan's pivot: It is to the United States and Europe. And Bakhti mentioned that, and I think that's important for us to highlight. It has a lot to do with a very basic fact. I would say in the last 10 years Mr. Erdogan has made efforts to change Turkey's identity at home towards a more Islamic one and not so secular, and internationally towards a Middle Eastern one and not so European. But as I said earlier, Turkey is the analytical onion. I think Turkey's identity can never be one. It has got multiple identities. So I would say in these efforts Mr. Erdogan has only had limited success. Turkey retains its nonbinary and multiple identities.

But there's a fact. Let's say Mr. Erdogan has succeeded to an extent to change Turkey's identity at home to an Islamic one and internationally to a Middle Eastern one. Turkey's economy is completely integrated with that of the European Union because of customs union in place since 1995 and as a resource-poor country Turkey needs financial inflows to grow again. Enter ties with the United States.

Bismarck once famously said Turkey's the east if you come from the west and west if you come from the east, which means when investors decide if they're going to put money into Turkey they don't just look at macro indicators; they also look at where Turkey's heading. And they don't want to be worried about Turkey leaving the West or heading in another direction, and I think because of that Mr. Erdogan wants to establish a narrative of good ties with President Biden. He's been very patient in establishing that relationship. It took President Biden 92 days to call President Erdogan after taking office here in Washington. Usually, presidents here when they take office call Turkey within weeks or two weeks at max, so that was quite a delayed call. And when Mr. Biden called, he didn't call President Erdogan to say, how are you, can we have a chat or meeting. He called to say, oh, I'm going to recognize the Armenian genocide. Erdogan's reaction was not, oh, how dare you, but he said, oh, can we still meet.

So you see that he's really patient to establish a narrative of good ties with the U.S., and there are some foreign policy openings in this regard. Afghanistan could have been one. Turkey wanted to run the airport in Kabul. That would have been an important lifeline with coalition embassies and the outside world. Unfortunately, Taliban, you know, bookended those dreams or that vision and – by taking the airport and the city before Turkey could step in to run the airport. But Ukraine, I think, provides now a really important area of cooperation.

I can only remember until a few months ago people would be writing op-eds saying let's kick Turkey out of NATO. I don't think you can publish such an op-ed in any major U.S. newspaper now because everybody's wondering what Turkey will do in the Ukraine crisis to help the United States. Turkey's identity as a NATO member has been recognized and underlined again. I think that's very important. Turkey also appreciates NATO.

So Ukraine is an interesting area because Turkey has very strong ties with Ukraine, robust. Sells drones, which Ukraine uses to attack Russian separatists as well as Russian

hardware threatening the country. But Turkey also has to balance its ties with Ukraine with its, you know, important relationship with Russia. So I would – I will say the following three – I will leave you guys with the following three assertions before I turn the floor to Deniz, in terms of Turkey's Ukraine policy.

Number one, Turkey will not deny Russia with access to the Black Sea through the Bosphorus. It will keep its policy of kind of try not to anger the military giant to the north.

Number two, Turkey will adopt a neutral tone. If there is a conflict and war, it will, you know, basically have a middle-of-the-line rhetoric. But behind closed doors – and we may not see this or read about it in the media – Turkey will support Kyiv militarily. And I think that's a very important takeaway for the U.S. government and others on the Hill, that, you know, this is really, I think, going to be an important indigenous area of U.S.-Turkish cooperation, because Turkey views Ukraine's sovereignty important for a variety of reasons. Tatars who live on the Crimean Peninsula, recently annexed illegally by Russia, are linked to Turks ethnically and religiously, and Turkey will never accept, therefore, Russia's annexation of Crimea. So it will always defend Ukraine's sovereignty.

And also, Turkey sees Ukraine as it sees other Black Sea countries, as important partners in establishing a balance of power against Russia in the Black Sea. Russia is a giant navy military power, nuclear power of course. So Turkey sees not just Ukraine, but Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, all around the Black Sea as important partners, and it will not allow Ukraine to fall under Russia or Kyiv to be flipped by a coup or other kind of Russian intervention.

So I think this is really important for us to look at moving forward. But with that, let me end and turn the floor over to Deniz.

NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Soner. I really, really appreciate that.

Deniz, please.

YUKSEL: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here speaking alongside my esteemed colleagues and, of course, Dr. Cagaptay, who I've had the pleasure of working with before joining Amnesty. And of course, thank you, Chairman Cohen, so much for joining this very timely conversation today.

Today, I actually want to draw your attention to what I feel very comfortable at this point referring to as Turkey's human rights crisis. And this crisis began in 2015 with the collapse of the fragile peace process between the Turkish state and the armed Kurdistan Worker's Party, the PKK, and it intensified following a failed coup attempt in July 2016. The Turkish government declared a state of emergency, granting the executive branch dangerous powers. Constitutional changes adopted in this period under the state of emergency extended executive control over the institution responsible for the appointment and dismissal of judges and prosecutors. These developments have seriously undermined the independence and integrity of the Turkish judicial system and, consequently, human rights.



The state of emergency ended in 2018, but new laws ensured that the executive branch could retain these broad powers and continue exercising control over an increasingly partisan judiciary. In fact, you'll learn from the rest of my testimony that abusive judicial practices are at the center of Turkey's human rights crisis. And from the record-breaking imprisonment of journalists to the persecution of LGBTI people, an ongoing crisis of gender-based violence, and the unlawful deportation of refugees, the failures of Turkey's judicial system cut across societal lines and undermine the human rights of all.

Opposition politicians, lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders, and academics are among scores of people imprisoned for months and sometimes even years pending trial in Turkey, often without any evidence of wrongdoing. The government uses overly broad terrorism laws to crack down on real and perceived opponents. The imprisonment of high-profile critics has had a chilling effect on Turkish society more broadly, sending a dangerous message that anyone who dares to speak out will suffer the same fate.

Turkey's partisan judiciary routinely targets lawfully elected opposition politicians, particularly in the country's mainly Kurdish southeast. Two former co-chairs of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, the HDP, Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag, remain imprisoned, convicted of terrorism charges, which in the absence of credible evidence, were largely based on their public speeches. Dozens of HDP members continue to be prosecuted, and the party itself faces a highly problematic closure case, ahead general elections in 2023.

Amnesty International has documented credible reports that indicate an increase in allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in detention. In September 2020, two villagers in the eastern Van province suffered severe injuries after being detained by soldiers and boarded on a helicopter. The soldiers involved in the incident reported that the man had attempted to escape by jumping off the helicopter, but in reality they'd been subjected to a brutal beating by the soldiers. One of the men, Servet Turgut, later died of his injuries. And journalists who covered the case were detained. More than a year later, there has been little progress in investigating these allegations and ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice.

Those who call out such abuses in Turkey risk being persecuted themselves, mired in the government's crackdown on civil society. Since the 2016 coup attempt, authorities have shuttered hundreds of NGOs, depriving those that need them of vital support. Among them are Kurds, LGBTI people, survivors of gender-based violence, children, and refugees. The government uses anti-terror laws to attack human rights defenders, including Amnesty Turkey staff and members, all in an effort to criminalize peaceful activism.

Turkish philanthropist and human rights defender Osman Kavala has spent over four years in pretrial detention, despite calls from the U.S. and EU for his release. Osman Kavala is a peaceful civil society leader who had dedicated his life to promoting dialogue between Turkey's Muslim Turkish majority and Kurdish, Armenian, and other minorities. Kavala's case is well known not just because of his celebrated civil society work, but also because of the deliberate cruelty of his legal ordeal. In February 2020, a Turkish court acquitted Kavala and ordered his release, but he was quickly rearrested in a separate, but equally baseless, case. This glimpse of

freedom must have been unimaginably painful for his friends and family, who just hours earlier had celebrated his release in a crowded courtroom.

Kavala's case is emblematic of thousands of people arbitrarily detained in Turkish prisons in the context of these politically motivated charges. The European Court of Human Rights has made judgements calling on Turkey to release a number of these political detainees, including Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtas. Although the court's decisions are binding, Turkish authorities have refused to implement them, and continue to unlawfully imprison both men. In fact, Turkish officials, including President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have repeatedly asserted that these rulings do not apply to Turkey. Of course, these statements are verifiably false, and have implications beyond these two cases. They obstruct Turkish courts' treaty obligation to accept the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights.

And further, Turkey's persistent non-implementation of ECHR judgements threatens the authority of the European Human Rights System more broadly. If Turkey can reject these judgements without consequence, why not Hungary, Poland, or others? That's why Amnesty International welcomed the Council of Europe's decision this month to launch infringement proceedings in the case of Kavala v. Turkey. We hope that the potential consequences of infringement – which range from the suspension of Turkey's voting rights to expulsion from the Council altogether – will provide incentive for Turkish authorities to free Osman Kavala and end this incomprehensible injustice once and for all.

Despite the Turkish government's efforts to criminalize peaceful dissent, Turkey is still home to a resilient civil society. Human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, and everyday people continue to risk their freedom and wellbeing to protest the government's human rights abuses. The U.S. government must stand in solidarity with them, and support their efforts to create a more free, a more just, and stable Turkey. The Biden administration's stated commitment to upholding universal rights at home and abroad is welcome. In Turkey too, the United States should put human rights first.

All U.S. officials at all levels must raise human rights concerns in every engagement with Turkish authorities, as well as in every speech and every statement on Turkey. A stronger focus on human rights will not hurt other U.S. interests and, most importantly, it is the right thing to do. Specifically, the U.S. government should urge Turkish authorities to respect judicial independence, bring anti-terror legislation in line with international law and, of course, end the crackdown on peaceful dissent. U.S. officials should call on Turkey to promptly implement ECHR judgements, including by releasing Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtas.

U.S. diplomats should convey to Turkish authorities that banning the HDP, Turkey's third-largest political party, would be a major step backwards for freedom of expression, and severely damage the prospects for a peaceful and enduring resolution to the conflict between Turkish authorities and the PKK. The U.S. should call on the Turkish government to launch prompt investigations into all allegations of torture and other human rights abuses and detention. The U.S. ambassador to Turkey and his staff should meet regularly with local human rights defenders and CSO representatives and make public statements of support. They should visit activists in prison and attend trials of human rights defenders and civil society activists.

There are also specific actions members of Congress can take to address Turkey's human rights crisis. Members should support a public hearing which highlights the Turkish government's human rights abuses and includes the testimonies of affected communities. Members should participate in the Lantos Commission Defending Freedoms Project, and advocate on behalf of prisoners of conscience from Turkey. Members should regularly raise concerns with the State Department and directly with the Turkish government, through actions such as dear colleague letters, floor statements, resolutions, and so on.

Member-level and staff delegations to Turkey must include prep meetings with human rights organizations prior to their visit, and also once on the ground in Turkey. And finally, members should consider providing additional funding for grassroots organizations in Turkey, and continue funding critical programs, like the lifeline, embattled, CSO assistance fund. These measures are critical to ensure that Turkish civil society can survive Turkey's ongoing human rights crisis.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions and comments.

NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Deniz. This has been both eye-opening and disturbing. But I think the theme from both of your testimonies is that there are challenges – there are serious challenges – but also there are some opportunities. And I think that's the goal of the briefing today is to identify those opportunities. And my first question – and, again, I would like to – I would like to ask if Co-Chairman Cohen, if you might have some questions for our witnesses and also open this up to other people. Again, feel free to use the chat box function and ask a question. But, Co-Chairman, did you have any questions just to follow up on these two testimonies?

COHEN: Thank you. I appreciate it. And I appreciate the – I failed to mention, which I guess I consider it a given, but it's not a given, how Turkey has been our friend in so many areas. And that's one of the reason I was proud to be, and have been proud to be a co-chair of the Turkey Caucus. They've worked with us. They've been friendly with Israel on and off, but more on. I think there's a visit coming up soon where they're reestablishing their previous relations. They've been a strong member of NATO and a member of the European Union. And they – I've had soldiers, older people, who have told me how they fought with them in the Korean War, and how much they respected that. That memory still exists in current folks, and it's been passed on to me.

I would – I'm concerned a little bit about the Turkish attitude toward the Kurds. The PKK is a terrorist organization, and they were doing a lot of terror when I was there. I think it was 2008 or '07. There was a lot of activities of bombings in Turkey, in Istanbul. But all the Kurds are not terrorists. And indeed, the Kurdish people in northern Iraq have a good reputation and had a good reputation during the Iraqi War. And certainly the Kurds in Syria have worked with us, the United States, against ISIS and have been our friends. I'd like your thoughts, either one of you, on how Turkey is treating Kurds in general. I know you mentioned the arrest of the two members of the parliament, but in general are Kurds being discriminated against in Turkey

and how do they distinguish between the Kurds in Iraq and the Kurds in Syria, and their concerns about their being terrorist organizations as well?

YUKSEL: I'm happy to take this question. Thank you for this very, very relevant question, Chairman Cohen. And you are absolutely right, the Turkish government's crackdown on human rights in general affects marginalized and minority communities more acutely, and the Kurds in particular, who have, of course, been repressed by successive Turkish governments for decades. And I think one issue that is particularly timely, you know, leading into an election year – and I sort of refer to it in my testimony a little bit as well – is the repression of Kurdish communities' political rights, right? And the big case right now that we have to be watching is the closure case facing the HDP, the pro-Kurdish party which represents the interests and the votes of millions and millions of people.

And at the root of this case in 2016 was the Turkish legislature's vote to remove the parliamentary immunities of dozens of HDP MPs. And that opened the way for countless investigations and prosecutions and, of course, the detention of HDP leaders. And these cases are currently at the basis of the government's efforts to shut down the party itself. And of course, it's part of the government's larger crackdown on Kurdish political expression, Kurdish civil society, and so on. But I wanted to raise this because there is a recent development that pertains to this case. And that is the ruling, I think earlier this month by the European Court of Human Rights, which said that the removal of the HDP MPs' immunity back in 2016, which formed the basis for all of these prosecutions, was actually a violation of these parliamentarians' human rights and a violation of their freedom of expression.

And this case is really important as a development while we're still going through this closure case against the HDP because now it brings into question whether all the cases that were brought against the individuals which the government is using in its argument to shut down the organization itself, it brings into question whether those are legitimate, whether those were done lawfully, and in fair trial processes. So with these in mind, it's really clear that the closure case is a very problematic one. And we're headed into an election year. But also because there hasn't been a permanent resolution, as you referred to in your comments. To the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK. And as the representative of million and millions of people, the HDP has a critical role to play, along with the Turkish state, in ensuring an enduring resolution to this conflict. So it's a major step backwards on both of those fronts. And thank you for raising that.

COHEN: I appreciate your response. And I understand that, and I agree it's a serious issue. Are there not quite a few members of the party that represents Kurdish people, I guess it's the HDP, in the parliament? And how are they responding to this? And also back to the issue about how – you know, Turkey, when I bring this issue up with them – and I appreciate your remarks about what Congress can do. I know I have, and I believe my co-chairs have joined me, particularly Congressman Connolly, we have expressed our regret to the Turkish government on many occasions for human rights abuses – many, many occasions. But they always respond when you ask them about Kurds in Iraq or in Syria, that they are just kind of cousins or something. They're all part of the same anti-Turkish terrorist-type organization. Have you noticed any distinction between how they treat the Kurds, or their attitude toward the Kurds in Iraq and Syria? Or do they feel they're supporting the PKK?

YUKSEL: Thank you for that question. I think that description at least of the Turkish government's view of Kurdish communities, you know, in Turkey and abroad, I think that's an accurate one. I think their actions do reflect this very, very problematic idea of Kurds – and there's millions and millions of Kurds around the world, right? It is impossible for all of them to be involved in one organization or another. And it's just a very inhumane way of looking at a community, and a very discriminatory and bigoted way to be associating all parts of a community with one particular organization, which is of course not the case, and couldn't be the case.

And I think we are seeing that not just in the political repression domestically of the Kurds, which I talked about a little bit, but also in the Turkish government's foreign operations, particularly, as you mentioned, in Syria and in northern Iraq as well. I mean, in Syria we saw Turkish forces and Turkish-backed groups, including some of which are reported to be directly armed by Turkey, engaging in serious human rights violations, some of which amount to war crimes, including enforced disappearances, unlawful killings, indiscriminate attacks on, you know, schools and civilian areas, which have resulted in, you know, a great number of civilian deaths and casualties as well.

And I think there hasn't really been an effort – you know, there has been several years since these operations have first started, back in 2016. And there hasn't really been a serious effort to hold the Turkish state and the groups it has supported and worked with accountable for these human rights abuses. And we have no guarantee that Turkey is not going to launch another operation which is going to involve, you know, another set of serious crimes against civilians there. So thank you for raising that.

COHEN: Now, would you like to add anything, sir?

CAGAPTAY: Thank you, Congressman. I agree with everything that Deniz said. And I think it's an important human rights issue in Turkey, obviously. And I think that the party elected to the parliament should be treated like all other parties elected to parliament. So I will stand with that.

COHEN: Thank you. The only other thing I'd like to mention is Hussein Ibish had a really nice piece today about UAE and Turkey, and how they are getting kind of back together. I think there was a visit on Valentine's Day, how appropriate. And they seem to be getting together. And it shows Erdogan is seeing the realities because of economic problems in Turkey and reuniting or establishing new relationships. And that's a bad reason, but good result. And I yield back.

NISHANOV: Thank you, Congressman – Co-Chairman Cohen, thank you so much for your comments. But also we would all like to acknowledge your leadership on this issue. You have been a proponent of a stronger engagement with Turkey, a principled engagement with Turkey. And we appreciate everything you've done. And I think you and Congressman Connolly's efforts never go unnoticed. So thank you so much. To all of us who watch Turkey,

you are one of those leaders who have done much and more to make sure Turkey, again, lives up to its potential.

One question that we got here, and maybe, Soner, I don't know if you would like to take that. And the question is: Would you like – would you say there is a correlation – and, Deniz, please feel free to jump in as well – would you say there is a correlation between Turkey's movement away from secularism and an increase in intolerance towards religious minorities? I think it's a really good question. You've pointed out in your opening remarks that Turkey, you know, there's an effort to move away from secularism. And what kind of an impact does it have on Turkish minorities – on minorities in Turkey?

CAGAPTAY: Absolutely. Let me step in. I'm sure Deniz can add a lot more. So, no, I think that actually giving him credit and being fair, under President Erdogan, back when he was prime minister during his first decade in power, Turkey actually saw an era of increased rights and liberties for non-Muslim communities. These are very small communities in the context of Turkish demographics. Turkey's population is 84 million people and non-Muslim communities add up to just about, you know, 0.1 percent of the total population at this stage. But, you know, I think a democracy is a real one not when it protects large groups, but when it protects small and vulnerable groups. And in this regard, there was a lot of progress, improved liberties for non-Muslim communities in the first decade of Erdogan's rule.

But now we have seen perhaps a reversal of that. Rising anti-Semitism I think is a huge concern in Turkey. And hate speech that is oftentimes endorsed by people as high up – government ministers targeting these communities, also a very serious concern. So I would say maybe legally rights and liberties have been expanded, but also we have seen a really dramatic rise in hate speech targeting mostly Jews, but also Armenians and Christians at the same time. So very problematic trends. And I think, as I said earlier, you know, the strength of a democracy is not when it protects a group that is a third of the population. It is when it protects a group that is one thousandth of the population. I think in this regard there's a lot the Turkish government can do.

NISHANOV: Excellent. Thank you so much. Another question that we have, and I think this sort of gets to the core of what we're trying to discuss here, is to what extent the cooperation between Turkey and the United States and EU on the Ukraine crisis, amid the Ukraine crisis, would affect their stance on human rights issues in Turkey. And I think we've talked about it a little bit, but I think that's always a concern. If we increase that, you know, mil-to-mil cooperation, will – is the United States and the EU – are we going to be more silent on human rights issues that are happening in Turkey? Maybe both of you – Soner and Deniz – maybe you could both sort of try that? Yeah.

CAGAPTAY: Sure, let me go first – or, Deniz, unless you want to jump in?

NISHANOV: Soner, please.

CAGAPTAY: All right. I'll go first then. Thank you. Yeah, I think that the administration's policy regarding Turkey is to create three silos, since President Biden took

office. The first silo include areas of disagreement, that is two topics under it. Of course, continued U.S. cooperation with Kurdish People's Protection Forces, YPG in Syria. Although the YPG helps U.S. fight ISIS, or contain it, rather, at this stage, there's a problem. The YPG's an offshoot of PKK, Kurdistan Worker's Party, that's a terror-designated entity. And there's no way Turkish government or Turkish public will embrace that policy. And that is a serious issue of discord.

The other side of it, of course, is Turkey's purchase of Russian-made S-400 missile defense system, for which Turkey has been sanctioned. And it's impossible for U.S. government to embrace that policy. So the first silo – or, area of discord includes these two items. And the Biden administration, in my view, has decided to kind of compartmentalize and say: Let's put these aside, let's not focus on these areas of disagreement. And they're looking actually for areas of engagement – Afghanistan, Ukraine.

Ukraine is a big one. It seems to be NATO's biggest test since the collapse of the Soviet Union, perhaps since the war in Bosnia, in terms of its area of operation being Europe, and the conflict brewing, of course. And I think Turkey, if Turkey helped the United States, even if this is behind closed doors and militarily, as I'm predicting, because Mr. Erdogan doesn't want to anger President Putin in Moscow, that will be – create a positive sentiment towards Turkey. So the question is, you know, can Turkey get away with broader human rights abuses and more autocratic measures at home?

The third silo that the Biden administration has created in regards to its policy on Turkey is that it also wants to have a human rights compartment where it engages Turkey on this area. I'll refer to Deniz on this, Ms. Yuksel, to see if the Biden administration has been forthcoming of keeping its promise of engaging Turkey on this – in this area. But as the question highlights I think, yes, there is a potential here that if Turkish assistance to the U.S. regarding Ukraine is significant, as invisible as it might be to the public eye, of course that that would allow – not so much, I think, in the eyes of the U.S. public, not necessarily – but in the eyes of many European governments, who already have a pragmatic relationship with Turkey, to sort of turn their head the other way.

So Europe and Turkey have a more intimate relationship than do United States and Turkey, because Turkey's part of Europe. It sits on the edge of the European continent as well. And so crisis in Turkey has the potential to export itself to Europe faster, and quicker, and easier than, of course, would be the case into the United States. Refugee crisis is one that recently got transported from Turkey to Europe. And I think that European countries, especially Germany, have a more pragmatic view of ties with Turkey. They engage Turkey's government. They raise their human rights concerns on the side.

But overall, I think that Turkey's autocratic slide under President Erdogan has become so severe, you know, those of you who follow me on Twitter may know that I'm a map nerd. And I just saw the map this morning looking at how countries are colored in terms of their democracies. Turkey is the only country other than Belarus and Russia on the continent that's now considered hybrid and not democratic, and not even a flawed one. And so it's hard for me

at this stage to see what kind of a hall pass Turkish government would get, even if it helped everyone else in Ukraine, because the democratic slide under Mr. Erdogan is so severe.

So I think maybe some cosmetic statements here and there, but broadly speaking, given how unfair the democratic playing field is, and given the increased nature of autocratic crackdown inside Turkey in the runup to elections that I'm predicting, it will be impossible, I think, for anyone to put lipstick on the pig and say, this is fine. We can deal with it. I hope that expression translates well in Turkish. I just made it up. (Laughter.)

NISHANOV: It was excellent.

CAGAPTAY: Thank you.

YUKSEL: Thank you.

NISHANOV: Deniz, please.

YUKSEL: I think, Dr. Cagaptay, you are the expert when it comes to foreign policy and defense issues. But I think sometimes we do tend to over-compartmentalize human rights, and see it as something that, you know, doesn't have any links to the issues that we're talking about when it comes to security and so on. And I think we should really avoid doing that. And that's sort of, like, a simplistic way of viewing things. And I would – for example, in this case, in the case in Ukraine, there is talk of Turkey supplying drones to the Ukraine. I would really like to caution people on this call, given credible media reports during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, that Azeri forces used Turkish drones to carry out disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas.

So there is a history of Turkey supplying drones, perhaps in good faith, to its partners, to other countries, and then not really overseeing how these drones are being used. And it's also raised the question of whether U.S. parts are being used in these Turkish drones, and therefore implicated in unlawful killings and attacks on civilian areas. I mean, we have laws here in the U.S., the Leahy laws and the Foreign Assistance Act, which obligates us to be considering these human rights aspects. Even when we're talking about what seems to be a purely defense and security issue, these human rights obligations still exist.

So given this history, I think implications of Turkish support or how Turkey can be positioned to, you know, benefit the interests of the United States, has to be considered alongside other factors given, you know, this administration's commitments to human rights, and also every, you know, country who's, you know, signed these treaties has commitments to human rights and has to consider them in every context. Thank you.

NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Deniz.

Let's go to the next question. I think this is, again, important. And I think we've alluded a little bit to the elections – upcoming elections in Turkey. So in addition to the more long-standing problems noted in the presentation, are there any that require additional attention, given



the upcoming elections this year? And would you expect further crackdowns on media, for example?

Deniz, if you would like to take that. And, Soner, please feel free to jump in.

YUKSEL: Absolutely. I think the number one, you know, issue that I would like to highlight with relation to the elections is the closure case against the HDP. But I know I've already extensively talked about that, so I guess we can also talk about some other things that, you know, we wouldn't be surprised to see leading into an election year. Even at this point, you know, journalistic freedoms and highly, highly limited in Turkey.

You know, dozens of media workers are persecuted for performing the most basic and most foundational acts of their professions, right? Cartoonists have been arrested for drawing cartoons, and reporters have been arrested for interviewing controversial guests. And this is all, you know, an effort to criminalize journalism itself. And it becomes even more important leading into an election year, when the government has even more incentive to crack down on criticism and to crack down on dissent.

And we're seeing signs of that already. We have heard from Erdogan's communications director a few months ago, signaled that there might be additional legislation coming to further regulate media organizations in Turkey. And we also have seen recently the Turkish media watchdog has started to implement an existing law regarding the extra, you know, regulations place upon foreign media organizations. And Voice of America, in fact, has been affected by this. And they've put out a statement saying that no matter what they're going to try to do their best to provide accurate and timely information to the people of Turkey.

And accurate and timely information is especially important in a time of election, especially when you have folks that are protesting the economic situation, and so on. Accurate information is really, really important for everybody's wellbeing and safety and, of course, for the integrity of the elections themselves. So I would be really, really closely watching this issue. And, again, wouldn't be surprised to see the crackdown deepening in the next year or so.

NISHANOV: Thank you, Deniz.

Soner, I wonder if you have any thoughts on this? Specifically, I think, it would be – you'd mentioned that the elections are going to be free, but they're not going to be fair. And I think this is a very, very, very good point. And if you could sort of talk a little bit about why they would not be fair.

CAGAPTAY: So thank you, again. And I'll just follow what Deniz left. Elections have not been fair for a while. They were free and fair, and Mr. Erdogan deserves credit for winning free and fair elections for almost 15 years – strong popular support, basically driven by the phenomenal economic growth that he delivered. And that's why he's in trouble, because since the economy entered into recession now he needs to win elections – continues to win elections, as he sees it, but not free any – not fair anymore, of course, I think. Ninety percent of conventional media is controlled by businesses that are loyal to him, some are directly linked to

him. He appoints majority of judges to the high courts without a confirmation process. He controls electoral boards. So the race is definitely not fair.

But it remains free. And in my view, it will be free. That is because Turkey is democratically resilient. What it means is that Turkey has been having free and fair elections longer than has been Spain. The country's first free and fair elections were held in 1950. That means four generation of Turkish citizens have been voting in elections. People know how to vote, and they love to vote. Turnout in Turkey is 85 percent. Impressive compared to the turnout rates we get here in the U.S. Not only that, but people protect their vote.

So Mr. Erdogan lost a first round Istanbul election in March 2019, very narrow margin. And he thought that because he controls institutions – media, electoral boards – he could repeat the elections and win them. So he claimed there was fraud. There was an insignificant margin of 13,000 votes in a city of 15 million people. He thought that he could make up for that margin easily in the repeat round that took place in June same year. Guess what? He lost that second round by nearly a 1 million vote margin – 800,000, to be precise.

That's democratic resilience for you, right? That's for citizens who voted for him saying, that's not fair. You lost. You know, you get one chance. You lose, you step down. And opposition organized a massive campaign, protect the vote, 100,000 volunteers, who went with their smartphones, documented the tally. Turkish law allows any citizen to observe the vote count. And Turks love to do that. And on top of it, these volunteers slept on top of the ballot boxes, literally, to prevent any rigging. So I think that the vote will be unfair, but it'll be free. And that's a big challenge for Mr. Erdogan.

So just also answering the question a little bit deeper, I do expect, as Ms. Yuksel said, further demonization of the opposition. And there's a little bit of domestic baseball, if I can explain. The opposition bloc has informal and formal partners, but it has one large party, a secular, leftist Republican People's Party, CHP, main opposition. And it has – the bloc has two wings. Formally, the Turkish nationalist Iyi Party – I-Y-I – of Meral Aksener, and informally HDP, pro-Kurdish liberalized People's Democratic Party, are in the bloc. HDP's going to support it from outside for a variety of things to do with the dynamics of the opposition, but they are part of the same bloc.

And I think what Mr. Erdogan will do is he will demonize the HDP in order to force – as the HDP being a pro-Kurdish force with a large Kurdish nationalist constituency, he's going to demonize the HDP further so as to push Turkish nationalist Iyi Party to abandon the opposition bloc. He knows that – Mr. Erdogan knows that he'll lose the race – he'll lose the elections in a two-way race. And that's his own doing, because the switch to the presidential system in 2018 has created this two-way race, because it has, you know, eliminated the multiparty parliamentary democratic race. So now Mr. Erdogan wants to create a three-way race. And for that, he's demonizing the Kurdish nationalist opposition in order to force the Turkish nationalist party in the bloc to abandon the opposition.

To put it very simply, Mr. Erdogan will win in a three-way race. He'll lose in a two-way race. And I think that's why we're going to see, unfortunately, more demonization of the

opposition. And there'll be other steps. For instance, crackdown on social media. With Mr. Erdogan having taken control over 90 percent of conventional media – and, again, Turkey has been a democracy and they've had free press for almost four generations now. You know, people, if they see government dictating headlines to 90 percent of papers and primetime, you know, networks, they won't read the news anymore.

So citizens and voters and news consumers are migrating in droves to social media platforms, where you have independent journalists who have millions of followers who do video, who do podcasts, who do tweets. And so I think you'll see a bigger crackdown on these platforms that provide for new avenues of journalism, free, of course, areas of journalism. And so I would say that's another area to watch. And so maybe if you want to help Turkish elections be free, you know, allow for these platforms to remain free. That's important.

It's ultimately up to Turkey's citizens to decide who they like and who they want to see in power. And that vote, though it may not be fair, I think will be free. So it will be important. Turkish elections matter. Right now they're scheduled for June 2023. I think those are going to be the most historic elections in the history of the Turkish Republic, since the first free and fair elections in 1950.

NISHANOV: That's a great point. And it's a great overview. Thank you so much. And it's a perfect segue to our next question, which is – (audio break) – so CHP chairman, opposition leader, came out – (audio break) – that elections could take place as soon as this fall, almost a year ahead of the scheduled date in summer 2023. Do you think this is likely?

Soner, maybe you'll take it. And, Deniz, please feel free to jump in as well.

CAGAPTAY: Sorry, Bakhti, you got cut off for a second. Was this about whether early elections are likely?

NISHANOV: Yes. Yes. I'm sorry – yes. I do apologize. Yes.

CAGAPTAY: So –

NISHANOV: Do you think snap election – early election is likely? Yes.

CAGAPTAY: I think – I mean, technically, yes. Actually, it's in the interests Mr. Erdogan. The new constitution he put in place, or amendments, rather, that created the executive style presidential system in 2018 give him two additional – two terms. There are still term limits. But the law also says that if the parliament is dissolved before the end of his one term, that gives Mr. Erdogan a third term. So it's in his interest to have early elections, either this term or, if he wins, next term, in order to add one more term to his tenure. He might do it this time, but probably not because if elections were held today, he would not win them. If elections were held in six months, I think he still would not win them – meaning, getting 50 percent.

That's a lot to do with the economic problems in the country. After phenomenal growth, 15 years of prosperity, Turkish citizens are coming down hard, economically speaking. And so I

think Mr. Erdogan's interest is to have growth – phenomenal, double-digits, if he can – for at least a year so citizens will forget the hardships of the economic crisis, and pandemic-related shrinking as well. These are independent factors, but they have been compounded in Turkey. You had indigenous economic problems, and COVID-related economic problems. And they're both now adding up to each other. So I think Mr. Erdogan is more interested in having at least a year of strong growth, waiting until June 2023, before he will do elections, because if he did elections after a few months of growth it won't be enough for citizens to forget the hardship they went through for at least four years.

He's got really a multitude of problems here. And that has to do with his own success, right? The economy was so good, people were so prosperous, that they're finding it hard now to adjust to the new reality of skyrocketing inflation. Thirty percent this year, high unemployment, double digits already. And that's unusual because citizens lived so well for so long under Mr. Erdogan. So perhaps he's a victim – he's a victim of his own economic success. And citizens are finding it very hard to embrace economic downturn, inflation, and unemployment. So I think that this stage my vote will be for elections on time.

NISHANOV: Excellent. Deniz, anything you would like to add to this?

YUKSEL: No. I think this is all really great analysis. And I'll just say that one person knows the answer and he is not on this panel today, unfortunately. (Laughter.) But –

NISHANOV: Next time we'll have to make sure to invite him. But sorry, yes. Yes. Thank you. Thank you. To be clear, we did invite Turkish government representatives, and they mulled it over, and we appreciate their consideration. But for various reasons, they could not join us this morning. So again, this is – again, this is in the spirit of cooperation and coordination. This briefing – that's the spirit of this briefing.

Well, one more question. I know we went over time, but if you guys can stay feel free to, and then maybe we could just – yeah, maybe we could try to wrap it up maybe in the next 10 minutes. So – and this one is very complementary to you, Dr. Cagaptay. How do you – Dr. Soner – how do you conceive of the foreign policy of Turkey on East Asia, especially China and South Asia regions? And I love your work on “New Sultan: Erdogan and the Price of Modern Turkey.” Great analysis with various perspectives covered. So there you go.

CAGAPTAY: Well, thank you, Bakhti. Please call me Soner. So China is an important piece of the puzzle. I think that Mr. Erdogan's reelection strategy, of course, as we've debated it, depends on returning strong economic growth. So for which, he wants to get along with the U.S. and Europe. Turkey being part of Europe economically, he wants to increase investment. Because the major source of FDI coming to Turkey is still European, notwithstanding Mr. Erdogan's efforts to change Turkey's identity. Economically, this is a European country. He wants to get along well with President Biden, to create a narrative of good ties with the U.S. so that markets will invest in Turkey again.

But he also, Mr. Erdogan also has to get along with Russia. President Putin has many levers. Russians were number one among the arrivals to Turkey before the pandemic. Turkey

has a very large tourism industry. In fact, it's among the – always among the top 10, sometimes top five most visited countries in the world. If anybody on this call hasn't visited Turkey, you guys should go and visit. There's great food, of course, that helps. But the bottom line is the Russians are number one among – were among number-one arrivals to Turkey. Ten million Russians visited Turkey before the pandemic. So maybe this summer 15 million will come and visit. That's over \$10 billion added to Turkey's economy. That is how Turkey will bounce back from economic recession.

Trade is an important part of the piece with Russia also. So I think one of the reason why Turkish support to the U.S. regarding Ukraine won't be public is because Turkish President Erdogan does not want to cross Vladimir Putin. He doesn't want to trigger retaliatory measures by Russia in case of overt Turkish assistance to Ukraine. And these measures by Russia could include sanctions. Putin could tell Russian tourists, don't go to Turkey. Go to Egypt. There's zero cost to him. He could ban Turkish exports. Usually he does that when he's angry at Turkey for political reasons. He has health excuses, or alibi, rather. So – and if he did that, you know, trade sanctions and tourism boycott could shave off a few percent points from Turkey's growth. And with that, of course, undermine President Erdogan's reelection prospects.

China comes in similarly. I think that President Erdogan has relied on China for soft loans, especially to build megaprojects, with the drawing off of FDI coming to Turkey, now that many people consider Turkey too unstable and risky to invest. President Erdogan's economic growth model is now driven by megaprojects. These are giant reconstruction projects, mostly bridges, tunnels, high-speed rail lines, metro lines. The Chinese have played a big role in funding these. The Chinese central bank has also established a swap line to Turkish central bank to help it sustain currency crisis. So I think President Erdogan wants to not anger Beijing as well.

That's a tall order. He has to get along well with Washington, the EU, Moscow, and Beijing all at the same time, while resetting ties with Israel and rich Gulf neighbors. He's also hoping, I think, for investment from the Gulf to restore economic growth. But I think Chinese policymakers are quite smart. They know that President Erdogan wants to court them, but they also know that Turkey is among the hub – one of the – is actually, I would say, the biggest hub of the Uyghur diaspora globally. There's a Uyghur diaspora here in Northern Virginia, in Germany. These are more recent diaspora hubs. Turkey has been a hub since 1949, since the Chinese Communist Party took physical control of Xinjiang, at the time called East Turkestan. And everybody in Beijing and their uncles know the fact that Uyghur leadership is in Turkey.

So I think that the Chinese are not going to be super crazy about bailing Turkey out. But at the moment, President Erdogan wants to maintain moderately good ties with China. So Turkey has been absent from any condemnation of Chinese policy targeted at Uyghurs and their persecution of the Uyghur community. And I think that has a lot to do with President Erdogan's own reelection prospects. I would say, as Deniz said, only one person knows when elections will be held, if they're early or not. And I would say the other takeaway of this conversation, if you want to kind of have a talking point writing to your bosses or to media or to anybody else, or summarizing it just for yourself, Turkish politics is all about Erdogan now. It's all about

Erdogan winning the next elections. He'll do whatever it takes to get to that goal. That also includes maintaining moderately good ties with China.

NISHANOV: Excellent. Thank you so much. I have one more question. I think this is a fascinating question and I would appreciate both of your perspectives: How does Turkish society view or respond to the Turkish government's increasing crackdown on individuals for insulting the president or insulting religious values, blasphemy, especially in connection with their social media posts? Would you say it has had an overall chilling effect, or how does the society in Turkey respond to that?

Maybe, Deniz, you would like to take it. And Soner, I would appreciate your thoughts on it as well.

YUKSEL: The simple answer to that is yes, it has had a significant chilling effect. I mean, I think those of us who are from Turkey or have friends in Turkey, we know this very intimately. I mean, our friends and families, you know, don't feel as comfortable tweeting their opinions and sharing their opinions publicly when it comes to the government's policies. And we're seeing a really, really unfortunate intensification of the way that the government uses these defamation laws. Particularly the criminal – parts of the criminal code in Turkey which establish the definition of criminal defamation, criminal defamation against a public official, against the head of state, and criminal blasphemy are very, very vaguely defined and, you know, not necessarily in line with international human rights law and standards.

And traditionally, these have been, for the most part, abused in order to silence media and journalists. And we're still seeing examples of that, right? Some of you might have heard of the journalist Sedef Kabash, who's now facing, I think, up to 11 years in prison for a tweet supposedly, you know, making a reference to the president – although without mentioning his name. That continues to be the case, but increasingly also these laws are being used against everyday people, just a bunch of followers tweeting out to their friends. And I think we're likely to see more of that headed into elections.

NISHANOV: Soner, your thoughts on this?

CAGAPTAY: I'll just say I agree with Deniz, Ms. Yuksel, in the sake of keeping our time.

NISHANOV: Thank you so much. This has been an incredible conversation and I would like to thank our – everyone who's submitted their questions. (Audio break) – continue this, the Helsinki Commission. Turkey is an important country, is an important regional power and a global power. And it's important for everyone, for all of us, but especially for people who live in Turkey, Turkish citizens, I mean. And it is – it's our concern as part of – Helsinki Commission, obviously, works very closely as part of that Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. And Turkey being as, as I mentioned before, a founding member, I think it's important for us to see that Turkey is again living up to commitments it has taken on itself.

So this has been a great conversation. So, Chairman Cohen, would you have any closing words? Any closing remarks?

COHEN: I just appreciate our witnesses and the hearing. I think it's important. The Turkey-American relationship has been strong, it needs to continue to be strong, but we don't need to overlook the human rights abuses in Turkey. We need to remain vigilant, and we shall.

NISHANOV: Excellent. I mean, I think I could not have summed this up better. It's important, but we will stay vigilant. Thank you so much, again, for your leadership on this issue.

COHEN: Thank you.

NISHANOV: Thank you so much to our witnesses. Incredibly knowledgeable. Our – yes, everybody in the comments, in the chat box, you will see that they are appreciating your in-depth research. And we're going to continue this conversation. Again, for a lot of reasons this is incredibly important. And as the election is coming up, I think we're going to be – we're probably going to have a hearing on Turkey, and make sure, again, that it's – you know, the election standards are held. And we will continue this conversation. Thank you so much, Soner, Deniz. This was wonderful. Please – if you have any – I know we are short on time, but anything you would like to add to close us off, I would appreciate that.

CAGAPTAY: Thanks so much, Bakhti. I also want to thank Co-Chair Congressman Cohen for hosting us. Very generous with his time. Members on the staff of the Commission, of course. And it was a great pleasure to be on the same panel with my colleague, Deniz Yuksel.

YUKSEL: Likewise. I mean, repeat all of those sentiments. Really, really grateful to the Commission staff and, of course, Chairman Cohen. Thank you, everyone, for being here, and for your excellent, excellent question.

CAGAPTAY: Likewise. Great questions, everyone. And thanks for being engaged in Turkey, a very important country. I appreciate everyone coming in today.

NISHANOV: Thank you, once again, to everyone for participating, and thank you to our witnesses. And with that, we're going to close this. And have a wonderful rest of the day. Bye-bye, everyone.

CAGAPTAY: Thanks so much.

[Whereupon, at 12:16 p.m., the briefing ended.]